

Teaching in Nepal



This year I chose to follow in the footsteps of many young people in opting to take a year out. While some decide to go to the heat of Africa or the mysticism of one of Thailand's many islands, I chose a secluded quietly beautiful Buddhist monastery in the heat of the Nepali jungle. Here, it is safe to say that the jungle and the children living within thought me a lot about myself and the world around me.

My project was teaching English to children from the ages of six to eighteen at a school near a Buddhist monastery in Daunne, Nepal. My accommodation was at the monastery's volunteer rooms which included two wooden beds, two wildly uncomfortable pillows and a ceiling fan. I was torn between choosing a less rural monastery, maybe one nearer to the hustle and bustle of the capital, Kathmandu. Upon further consideration, I chose to spend my months there living as the locals do, a choice I would make over and over again if asked.



This meant an eight hour bus ride to Daunne from Kathmandu. This bus ride, as many more would be later on, was a unique experience. On the one hand, much less leg room and a quick shut-eye was impossible with Hindu movies blaring in the background. On the other hand, you get to see the relief of Nepal in all three regions: mountains, hills and plains and a bonus of course, the occasional goat enters and that's just free entertainment right there.



I exit the bus and am greeted by four wide-eyed, smiling children who help me get my rucksacks up the way-too-many stairs leading up to the monastery. I later noticed that stairs were all the rage in Nepal and no mountain track should ever go around but rather straight up the mountain. Pretending to breathe normally after the effort of climbing these stairs (for the kids, it was a casual stroll), I met the head nun who offered me apples and bananas while introducing me to my surroundings and schedule. The monastery was beautiful. Not the lavish beauty of the more frequently visited monasteries in Kathmandu but the much more subtle and natural kind of beautiful that makes you feel as if this place was a loving



home. It was - a home to children that were either living there as a type of boarding school since the school was only a ten minute walk from the monastery or they have nowhere else to go, as orphans. The children meet a lot of volunteers and are used to Western people but were nonetheless entranced by how light my skin is, how long and how curly my hair is. They played with it relentlessly.

I was exhausted from the bus ride. Likely, I wasn't alone since three other volunteers were there with me, equally exhausted. We exchanged stories of our bus rides and we were all cumulatively terrified with the very flexible rules of the roads in Nepal. We ate and spoke shortly with the nuns with very sweet milk tea in our hands and then proceeded to get settled in. We found out that the bathrooms were outside and shouldn't really be called 'bathrooms' but rather 'bucketrooms' if anything. "It's all part of the experience", we said, saying goodbye to Western comforts.

Our schedule was packed but upon getting used to it, doable. Four thirty was when morning prayer began and with it our day (or rather the day since we watched the sunrise each morning). After that, breakfast (rice pudding Nepali-style) at six. The girls and I skipped breakfast for the most part because Nepali style rice pudding was just too different. Lunch, however, was always eagerly awaited- daal bhat. I could write a whole other essay just on that daal bhat. After six hours of school and an hour of tutorials for the younger children, it was all that was on our minds. The prayer before actually eating seemed to be an hour long for our hungry brains but the meal itself was finished within five minutes, and then it was time for seconds, and occasionally thirds... Daal



bhat consists of like a kilo of rice smothered in the soup that the vegetables were boiled in, the vegetables being mainly potatoes and cauliflower. While not very nutritious, knowing that you get only two meals of it a day makes a person change their perspective on food. I started looking at food as fuel and a reward for a long day's work; Which is why I was twice as angry on one occasion when a monkey sneaked up from the jungle and stole my potato, the potato being my favourite part of the meal!

The work itself was incredibly fulfilling. Teaching English to those children was a delight and way more fun than expected. Their books were short and reread by them far too many times for us to be of any



help teaching the same things again, so we improvised. We wrote our own stories and questions, played learning games and the children loved it. They enjoyed going to school. It was fun and interesting to them and they were eager to learn. A contrasting mindset compared to this side of the world, at least back home. Children see school as an obligation because they all have the opportunity since education is wildly available and even seen as a must. In Nepal and especially in the middle of the jungle, it was not. The kids appreciated learning and knowledge in its own right. They wanted to know everything about my country, my house, the kinds of subjects at my school, what I did for fun ect. They learned some words in Montenegrin and were very proud of themselves and I learned some Nepali and was very proud of myself. I thought them English but honestly, I think they thought me much more than I ever could them.



They had nothing, some of them not even parents. The same meal repeatedly, same schedule every day. While it included play time, it also included a lot of physical work, and yet they were happy. And not just



happy occasionally, they had this peace inside them that couldn't be altered by outside circumstances. I didn't know how to word that until a fellow traveler I met in a hostel said it. It's the difference we both noticed in the people of Nepal compared to Westerners. Of course, it is a generalization and we're speaking from personal experience but it seems to me that people there are aware that happiness comes from the inside. Not having much makes you realize you don't need much. The time I spent with these children really helped me on a spiritual level. I expected my trip to change me for the better but I didn't expect it to help me grow as much as it did. Nepal's natural beauty and its culture are enough to lead a person to peace. You can't help but absorb everything that Nepal offers.

The girls and I had set out to explore Nepal outside the monastery so we took weekend trips. We first visited Buddha's birth place, Lumbini. Lumbini is a town way too exposed to the scorching sun. Walking to the temples was way too difficult for us in that sort of heat so we traveled in style, by tuk tuk. The first temple we visited was the birth place of Buddha which was by far the most beautiful. We took off our shoes and walked barefoot on sun soaked bricks surrounded by meditating monks, a fish pond and the green of the trees and grass that surrounded the temple. That part of my trip was when I felt the most at peace. The energy of that place was heavy in that you felt it as soon as you walked in, that something important and highly spiritual was happening there. I enjoyed it immensely. After the temple, the girls and I walked in silence with smiles on our faces and that was what it was like for the whole boat ride to the Lumbini Bazaar. We went back to our hostel, and slept until the next morning.



We only had half a day but we used it to the fullest. A three course breakfast was the way the day began and then the Peace Pagoda, Chinese, Cambodian and Japanese temples. However breathtaking, they couldn't compare to the walk around Buddha's birthplace. We returned to our temple in the evening just in time for daal bhat, which we missed dearly. We told the children all about Lumbini and showed them the things we bought. I had bought earrings since the kids kept asking me why I'm not wearing any. They were very pleased and played with them and were very excited to have us back to teach.

The day after Lumbini was another memorable experience because Bob came to visit, Bob being an American Buddhist that did fundraising for our monastery. He obviously spoke English way better than anyone there and it was incredibly refreshing to speak to him about our monastery. The nun's tried to explain but for the most part we couldn't understand each other. We walked to the Shiva temple that was above ours with him and he was an excellent guide teaching us about the history of Nepal from the Hindu and Buddhist perspectives. After that trek, it was school as usual.

After a few weeks I realized that Nepali people absolutely love holidays and there was at least one a week. The children and I were overjoyed when it was a holiday since that meant a whole day of play time. We played volleyball, football and some very made up games. After that I cleaned and assorted beans and helped out in the kitchen while the children cleaned the school grounds. We continued playing afterwards and I found out that the children loved to sing random pop American songs. Even I didn't know some of them but I sang

along and we even danced. I've come to love the children there and realized it would be harder than I thought to say goodbye. But that was still a way away.

The next place we visited was Pokhara. Pokhara was not as loud as Kathmandu but just as much a tourist attraction. Phewa lake was the biggest attraction and really was as peaceful as it gets. The lakeside is where our hostel was and we only had to go out to the terrace to see the lake. In Pokhara, my inner adrenaline junky was dancing happily. I did whatever I could, which included paragliding above the lake, zip-lining down the world's longest, fastest and steepest zip-line and above all else bungee-jumping. The bungee jump was positioned above a valley and as I stood there I looked down on wild buffalo roaming and Nepali children splashing in the tiny river that ran beneath me. I couldn't believe what an experience I was able to have, and then the jump. I enjoyed myself so much I decided to stay a day longer and do a one day trek to Bagnas lake close by. In the end, I met people who took me cycling to Bagnas lake at dawn and once we got there we did yoga by the lake and meditated. That part of the trip was when I realized how important it is to have at least twenty minutes of peaceful clarity a day and I continued doing yoga and meditating even after leaving Nepal.



After four days in Pokhara I couldn't wait to return to the kids and show them pictures and videos and tell them all about the trip. They couldn't wait for my return either. By now, I have gotten used to my usual responsibilities so I began taking on new ones. I went through the jungle with the kids and chopped and carried wood that we need to cook lunch and dinner, we piled leaves and then burnt them (didn't strike me as the safest way to get rid of leaves but hey, it worked), picked beans and genuinely enjoyed ourselves.

It would soon be time to go and that saddened me. However, I did miss my own home and family and couldn't wait to tell them all about my travels and experiences. And wow, I couldn't put it in words if I

tried. Writing this brought the feeling back, that feeling of being in such a wonderful place with such wonderful people. I couldn't explain how fulfilled I still feel after my time as a volunteer in Daunne. I promised the children that I would return and I plan on it. All in all, my time spent there teaching English and learning has changed me for the better in every way, I decided to study philosophy which I was unsure about before Nepal and I still practice what I learned there and will continue to aspire to reach the peace I felt there wherever I am.